

CONTRIBUTION OF INDIAN WOMEN IN TACKLING ENVIRONMENT PROTECTION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

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Abstract

In the Earth Summit (1992), formally known as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) agreements played pivotal roles in shaping gender-sensitive approaches to environmental action, recognizing the importance of gender equality in achieving sustainable development goals. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change UNFCCC has made significant headway in recognizing the need for gender equality in climate policy, with countries integrating gender considerations into their climate action plans. A key goal of gender balance in national delegations and climate policy was adopted in 2012, and progress is being tracked. Women play a particularly crucial role in protecting the environment. Specifically in rural areas, their daily tasks, such as farming, collecting water, and gathering firewood make them deeply invested in maintaining biodiversity and ensuring the sustainability of local ecosystems. This relationship between women and the environment has inspired many grassroots movements in India, where women have been leaders in protecting forests, water resources, and agricultural practices. Their involvement is not just a matter of defending their immediate environment, but also a broader call for justice and equality in the way resources are managed.

Key words: UN, UNFCCC, Indian environment movements, Indian women Environmentalist

Introduction

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was established following the first UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden in June 1972.¹ Since then UNEP has consistently worked at the forefront of environmental advocacy, helping to highlight the importance of sustainable development, promoting scientific research, and providing a platform for dialogue among governments, businesses, and civil society, coordinating international responses to crises such as biodiversity loss, pollution, and climate change, also helped in mobilize resources and political will to address environmental challenges still facing the world, and the ongoing need for collective action to safeguard the planet for future generations.²

The Women's Major Group at UNEP has been actively involved in advancing gender equality within environmental policies since 1985.³ Through initiatives like UNEP Decision 23/11, emphasize is on the importance of women's empowerment for achieving broader sustainable development goals.⁴ The intersection of gender, environment, and sustainable development, and how empowering women is essential for addressing global environmental challenges effectively can be well illustrated by demonstrating female population, share in

utilization of resources, engaging majorly at agricultural activities, her role in household resource management majorly for water, food and fire wood. In the Earth Summit (1992), formally known as the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED),⁵ the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)⁶ and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)⁷ agreements played pivotal roles in shaping gender-sensitive approaches to environmental action, recognizing the importance of gender equality in achieving sustainable development goals. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change UNFCCC has made significant headway in recognizing the need for gender equality in climate policy, with countries integrating gender considerations into their climate action plans.⁸ A key goal of gender balance in national delegations and climate policy was adopted in 2012, and progress is being tracked.

India is witnessing the active and influential participation of women in the conservation of environment even prior to the Earth summit 1992. The relationship between women and the environment has inspired many grassroots movements in India, where women have been leaders in protecting forests, water resources, and agricultural practices. Their involvement is not just a matter of defending their immediate environment, but also a broader call for justice and equality in the way resources are managed. It is significant to mention Harsh Sethi's classification of India's environmental conflicts which are Forest-based policy, Land use policy, Against large dams, Industrial pollution and overuse of marine resources. Moreover, in contemporary period, Indian women are actively working to combat climate change. Elaben Bhatt's introduction of the concept of "Swachh Akash" (Clean Skies) during SEWA's 50th anniversary is incredibly poignant and forward-thinking. By linking the impact of climate change to the lives of socio-economic deprived women affected by climate shocks like heatwaves, floods, and unpredictable weather patterns. Her call to action for the next generation of leaders to focus on building cleaner skies.⁹

Objectives

1. To study major environmental protection movements initiated and carried by women.
2. Leading women in combating climate change.

Analysis

Indian environmental movements and woman leadership

Gaura Devi, Sudesha Devi, Bachni Devi, and other women from the village Mandal, played crucial role in Chipko Movement. In the 1960s with the rapid loss of forests, many communities, particularly in rural areas, people in the Himalayan region of Uttar Pradesh (now Uttarakhand),¹⁰ were directly impacted by the depletion of resources they depended on for their daily survival. The women, in particular, were heavily involved in collecting wood, making their daily early-morning trips to the forests to gather the necessary amount of firewood for their families. To protect trees, women kept all night vigilance guarding the trees and by clinging them protected from cutting.

Tulsi Gowda, a renowned environmentalist and Padma Shri awardee, passed away at 86 on 16th December 2024, in Karnataka. Known as the "Mother of Trees," she dedicated over 60 years to planting and nurturing lakhs of trees. Born in 1944, from the Halakki tribal

community, her deep knowledge of plants earned her the title "Encyclopaedia of Plants." She was "guiding light for environmental conservation." She started as a daily wage worker at a forest department nursery and became a symbol of afforestation. Her work in environmental conservation leaves a lasting global legacy. In 2021, Tulsi Gowda was honoured with the Padma Shri, one of India's highest civilian awards, for her significant contributions to afforestation and environmental conservation. Gowda also received an honorary doctorate from Dharwad Agricultural University and the Indira Priyadarshini Vriksha Mitra award.¹¹

Prabha Devi's story is incredibly inspiring. Hailing from Palashat, a village in the Rudrapraya district of Uttarakhand, despite the lack of formal education, she has demonstrated immense wisdom and a deep connection to nature. Her dedication to preserving the environment by planting trees shows how even small actions can lead to large-scale, positive changes. The fact that she took it upon herself to counteract deforestation and improve the local ecosystem by planting over 500 trees, including various species like oak, rhododendron, and cinnamon, is a powerful testament to her commitment to protecting the environment. Her knowledge about the terrain and the specific needs of trees is a valuable asset, and it's impressive that she used her own land as a starting point to build a dense forest.¹² It's also amazing how she addressed the depletion of the underground water table by suggesting the planting of local species like Baanj, which not only improve water retention but also support local livelihoods.

Vandana Shiva's journey as an intellectual, activist, and advocate has been deeply impactful, not only in India but globally. Her multifaceted work spans crucial areas such as agriculture, biodiversity, women's rights, and ecology. She is best known for her staunch opposition to the destructive impacts of genetic engineering and globalization, particularly on small farmers, indigenous knowledge, and ecosystems. Shiva's early training as a physicist, paired with her later shift to environmental and social issues, set the stage for her groundbreaking contributions. She led movements like Navdanya,¹³ a network dedicated to preserving indigenous seeds and promoting organic farming, which is seen as a counter to the industrial agriculture model that dominates much of the world today. Her efforts around biodiversity have been groundbreaking, particularly in advocating against "biopiracy," where companies patent indigenous knowledge and resources, which she argues perpetuates exploitation and undermines local communities.

Her work on ecological and gender issues is also notable. The book 'Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Survival', presents the intersection between women's rights and environmental justice, highlighting the critical role women play in ecological sustainability. Shiva's global campaigns have continued to elevate her voice in national and international forums, challenging institutions like the World Bank and WTO that perpetuate harmful policies toward the environment and marginalized communities. In addition to her scholarly work and activism, her recognition by prominent global institutions like the UN and Time magazine reinforces her as a central figure in environmental and social justice movements.

Kollakkayil Devaki Amma despite having no formal education, recognized the critical importance of trees and took it upon herself to nurture a five-acre forest in Muthukulam,

Kerala. The forest, which features a rich diversity of around 200 tree species, serves as a living testament to her commitment to nature and the environment. Her forest is not just a green space, but an ecological haven that attracts nature enthusiasts and botanists from around the world, with its rare and unique plant species. The belief that it's so thick that not a single raindrop hits the ground is a beautiful metaphor for the forest's profound effect on the local ecosystem. Some trees in the forest, like the Krishnanaal and Kayambo, hold deep cultural and mythological significance. Devaki Amma's work exemplifies the power of individual action in tackling global environmental issues, long before they became mainstream concerns. Her recognition with the Indira Gandhi Vrikshamithra Award in 2002 is a fitting tribute to her dedication.

Medha Patkar's life and work are a testament to her commitment to social justice, human rights, and environmental protection. Born in 1954 in Bombay (now Mumbai), India, Medha was influenced by her parents' social activism. Medha pursued higher education in social work at the prestigious Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). Her path took a decisive turn when she became involved with the Narmada Valley Development Project. The injustices faced by the adivasis (Indigenous peoples) and other local communities due to the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam led her to abandon her Ph.D. studies and devote herself entirely to activism. This marked the beginning of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save Narmada Movement), a non-violent resistance campaign that she led for over three decades.¹⁵ Her methods, rooted in community organization and social action, employed satyagraha (non-violent resistance) as a powerful tool to mobilize and challenge the state and central governments of India. Her efforts earned her numerous awards, including the Right Livelihood Award, the Goldman Environmental Prize, and recognition from Amnesty International.

Sumaira Abdulali is an environmental activist whose work has had a significant impact on both local and global environmental issues. She is particularly known for her efforts in fighting sand mining and noise pollution, two major environmental challenges in India. Her journey began in 2004 when she first reported illegal sand mining at Kihim Beach. This led to her being physically attacked during a site inspection, which only strengthened her resolve to fight for environmental protection. In response to the intimidation faced by activists, Sumaira founded MITRA (Movement against Intimidation, Threat, and Revenge against Activists), which aims to safeguard public-interest activists from harassment.¹⁶

Sumaira's activism around sand mining is remarkable. She filed the first public interest litigation (PIL) on sand mining, which resulted in policy changes at both the state and national levels. One notable contribution was her participation in the first Roundtable of the United Nations on sand resources, where she provided input for their report, "Sand and Sustainability."

Through her advocacy, awareness, and legal action, noise pollution has been significantly reduced in Mumbai, especially during the festival season. This was the result of her PIL, which led to the Government of Maharashtra declaring an anti-noise pollution year in 2018. Her efforts even contributed to protecting wildlife corridors, like the Sawantwadi-Dodamarg

Corridor, which is crucial for wildlife movement, including tigers and elephants, in the Western Ghats.

Kinkri Devi's exposure to the environmental destruction around her in Himachal Pradesh fuel her determination to protect the natural resources that were vital to her community's survival.

Her work brought her into direct contact with local communities, and it was during this period that she became more aware of the damaging effects of illegal mining. Mining, which threatened the land and the environment, was something she could not ignore. With no formal education but an unshakable sense of justice, she dedicated herself to protecting the land and forests from exploitation. Kinkri Devi's courage to take on powerful mining giants, especially at a time when social media didn't exist and news spread at a much slower pace, is remarkable. It emphasizes that true activism comes from a genuine commitment to one's beliefs and the welfare of others, not from the platforms or recognition that may come later.

Her legal battle in 1987, which led to a ban on harmful mining practices in Himachal Pradesh, was a monumental victory not just for her, but for the entire region. Her activism didn't stop there, though. Kinkri Devi's efforts to raise awareness about environmental degradation and her emphasis on preserving natural resources have continued to inspire many. Her slogan, "Jal, jungle, pahar ko bachao" (Save water, woods, and hills), remains a rallying cry for environmentalists.¹⁷

Rahibai Soma Popere worked in agro-biodiversity and organic farming showcases the power of grassroots efforts in making a big impact. She initiated National Seed Conservation Program, develop a nationwide initiative to educate farmers, especially in rural and tribal areas, about the importance of preserving indigenous seeds, organic farming, and agro-biodiversity. Partner with schools and local communities to organize exhibitions, seminars, and farmer exchanges, showcasing the impact of diverse crops on nutrition and resilience against climate change. She developed Community Seed Bank Network, Mobile Seed Bank & Nursery Project by establishing a network of community-driven seed banks across different regions.¹⁸ She ran Women Agriculture Empowerment Program focusing on educating and empowering rural women, teaching them about sustainable agriculture practices, seed conservation, and leadership in their communities.

Saalumarada Thimmakka, dedicated herself to environmental conservation with a selfless love for nature. The journey of planting and nurturing trees began when she and her husband decided to plant banyan trees along a stretch of highway between Hulikal and Kudur in Karnataka. What makes their story even more remarkable is that they not only planted these trees, but they also nurtured and protected them with immense care, even going as far as fencing them off with thorny bushes to keep herbivorous animals from damaging them. Over the years, Thimmakka and her husband planted nearly 8,000 trees, gaining recognition for their dedication. Her effort is especially impressive considering the physical labor involved in planting and maintaining these trees in an area where no trees previously existed. Her recognition on prestigious platforms like BBC's list of the 100 most influential women, as

well as the prestigious Padma Shri award, are well-deserved honours that highlight the positive impact she has made on the environment and the world.¹⁹

Madhu Bhatnagar has not only been a leader in sustainable practices at The Shri Ram Schools but also a dedicated advocate for broader societal change. Her early recognition of the need for environmental education, even before formal mandates, demonstrates her foresight and passion for the planet's future. The practical achievements under her leadership, such as water harvesting models, zero-waste zones, and bans on harmful materials, reflect a holistic approach to sustainability. Her principle, "Give Nature Half, and it will balance itself," is a powerful reminder of the importance of balance between human activity and nature. Her efforts during the 2005 Tiger Crisis at Ranthambhore, where she helped halt poaching and supported the rehabilitation of the Moghya tribals, showcase her dedication to both conservation and human welfare.²⁰

Sunita Narain's work addressing global environmental challenges like climate change, particularly in promoting decentralized technologies such as rainwater harvesting and advocating for more inclusive governance. One of the main ideas is the concept of "climate-changed commons governance," which refers to the need for smarter, more equitable institutions to manage shared environmental resources like air, water, and land in a way that accounts for both human and ecological needs.

Narain's advocacy for decentralized technology, such as rainwater harvesting, aims to give local communities more control over their resources and enable them to adapt to changing climate conditions. She also critiques the infrastructure systems that often perpetuate environmental degradation, like the use of high-sulphur peat coke in India, which was imported cheaply due to lax regulations in the US and China. These systems often transfer risks from wealthy regions to poorer ones, exacerbating inequality and environmental harm. The "environmentalism of the poor" she describes highlights the need to respect local communities' voices and knowledge in creating solutions.²¹

Conclusion

India has been witnessing woman's active role and leadership in environmental as well climate change in rural and tribal areas majorly. Indian power of individual action and collectively by women in tackling global environmental issues, long before they became mainstream concern. Specifically, forest regions, rural areas have been the centre of the environmental movements. Even though not highly educated, economical and social hindrance, care and love towards environment and observations made Indian women sensitive towards it. Since 1970s till contemporary period Indian woman is promisingly reflecting her care and respect for the environment. Her work is registered not only at national but international level also. Indian common woman is coming out to tackle climate change.

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